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I love what I do.

One of the primary reasons I love what I do is that I love *why* I do. I love the One who is at the center of our mission together as a church. He is the Lord Jesus. Our reason for being, as Ventura Community Presbyterian Church, is “to know, worship and proclaim *Jesus as Lord*.”

Jesus is the integrating factor in our mission. Jesus is the reason we exist as a community of believers. Each of the three core components are intimately related, because they are centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our learning is centered in Jesus, our worshipping is centered in Jesus, and our bearing witness in the world is centered on Jesus. *The lordship of Jesus is the glue that holds together all aspects of our life and mission together as a church.* The lordship of Jesus is the glue that holds my life – with all its disconnectedness and waywardness – together. The lordship of Jesus is the glue that holds his Body – with all its disconnectedness and waywardness – together.

Worship, discipleship, and mission. Each of these activities is essentially integrated with the others. To eliminate one is to weaken the other two.

I am writing this article to make a case for the essential integration of the first two aspects of our mission: knowing and worshipping Jesus as Lord (discipleship and worship), and to demonstrate how these two acts of faith give integrity to our shared mission in the world.

Both worship and discipleship are appropriate responses to the amazing grace of God, revealed in Jesus. According to the New Testament, to not invest in worship and discipleship is to live in incongruence with the grace of God and the lordship of Christ.

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV) states: *¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Paul’s “therefore” in 12:1 is pivotal in his letter to the Romans, and pivotal to linking worship and discipleship with the radical message of God’s grace outlined in the previous eleven chapters of his letter. Here is a summary of these chapters:

- Romans 1-3: all creation has been created for God but has been corrupted by sin; all humanity is under sin’s debilitating power (both pagan outsiders and “religious” insiders alike); that we are powerless to save ourselves,
- Romans 3- 8: in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit, God has provided a righteousness that makes us whole before him and one another; this gift of righteousness is available to Jews and Gentiles alike, and thus,
- Romans 9-11: this gift of righteousness provides the foundation for a new community in Christ (the church) empowered by the Holy Spirit to be God’s instrument in the world.

In response to God’s amazing mercy in Christ, we are called to a whole-hearted pursuit of worship and discipleship. This two-fold response is one that can only be fully made within and by a community of believers. The integrating theme of Romans 12 is life *together*. All the “you’s” in this passage (as in most of the New

Testament Epistles) are plural in the Greek, not singular. This is sadly missed in the English translations. The most faithful response to grace is one raised by and from within the community.

The first response to grace is worship. Worship is the act of gathering together to offer our whole selves to God. When Paul uses the word “bodies” he includes our whole selves, both personally and corporately. This is reflected in Eugene Peterson’s translation of Romans 12:1 (in *The Message*): *So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.*” *Worship involves taking not just part of my life, but my whole life, and placing it before God.* This is why the people of God come together on the Lord’s Day: to re-present our whole selves to God, week in and week out. Word, Sacrament, prayers, music, testimony, and commissioning are integral to this gathered act of self-offering. As God has given his whole self to us in the sacrifice of Christ (see Romans 3-5), we respond by presenting ourselves as “living sacrifices” to Christ. This is the essence of biblical worship.

The second response to grace is discipleship. Like worship, discipleship cannot take place in isolation. Discipleship, like worship, is a gathered response to grace. Discipleship involves both a “no” and a “yes.” We are called to say no to mindset of this world and to the ways in which we have allowed our lives to be conformed to the world’s values and priorities. Discipleship also involves saying yes- yes to the renewing of our minds in Christ. According to Paul, this renewal of our minds is the key to transformation (“metamorphosis” in Greek). This renewal involves a systematic, balanced immersion in the whole will of God as revealed in the whole of Scripture. Because the church is and always has been shaped (and mis-shaped) by its current cultural context, we constantly need the lens of the Holy Spirit as we interpret and apply the Word of God. We also need to draw wisdom and perspective from the historic and global church. The great “cloud of witnesses” represented in the faithful theological traditions provide healthy and necessary checks and balances for contemporary believers. Only as we regularly engage together with the whole of biblical truth can we discern both the “no” (the mindset of the world) and the yes (the mindset of Christ).

What is the result of this renewing of our minds? Discernment of the will of God: *Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will* (v. 2b). According to Paul, the ability to know and do the will of God is at the heart of discipleship. We are living in a culture swimming in information and starved for wisdom. Never before in all human history, I believe, has there been a time when the church is in such need of discernment.

To sum up the process of discipleship, listen to Eugene Peterson’s translation (Romans, v. 2): *Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

Discipleship gives both depth and completeness to our worship. As we grow to know the God of the Bible in discipleship, the appropriate response is to worship Him. As we experience the God of the Bible in worship, the appropriate response is to get to know Him better. The natural response to both worship and discipleship is to make Jesus known to in the world to which we are called.

Worship and discipleship are complimentary, interconnected, interdependent, reciprocal aspects of our response to God’s grace in Christ. Worship is the fire that feeds a life of discipleship. Discipleship is the shaping of the life that is nourished by worship, so that it overflows with integrity and love into our daily lives. Worship, through discipleship, feeds the integrity of our shared witness in this post-Christian world to which we live out our calling on the other six days of the week.

I love what I do, and count it a privilege to share in this mission with you, my brothers and sisters in Christ of Community Presbyterian Church.